

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



ISAIAH ROGERS
1800-1869

Isaiah Rogers has had the posthumous misfortune to have almost all of his finest buildings destroyed. His major works are therefore almost unknown today in spite of the fact that he was one of the most famous and important American architects from the mid-1820s until after the Civil War. He was born on August 17, 1800, in Marshfield, Massachusetts, where his ancestors had settled in 1647. He remained on his family's farm until 1817, when, encouraged by Edward Preble Little, an older relative by marriage, he foresook the plow and walked to Boston to learn the builder's trade from the housewright Jesse Shaw.¹ From 1822 until he commenced independent practice in 1826, Rogers trained with the Boston architect Solomon Willard. Rogers' first known connection with Maine was a personal one, for on October 15, 1823, he was married by the eminent Universalist clergyman Hosea Ballou to Emily Wesley Tobey, daughter of Lemuel Tobey of Portland.² However, since the wedding was performed in Boston, we do not know whether the bride resided there or in her native Portland.

In 1827 Rogers' first major building, the Tremont Theatre, was built in Boston. The facade of gray Quincy granite with white "Eastern" granite pilasters and cornices from Hallowell was rated in 1836 by the architect Arthur Gilman as "the most perfect piece of architecture in Boston."³ Rogers made it a practice to inspect quarries supplying material for his buildings, so it seems likely that he visited Hallowell in 1827.

Rogers' second important work, Boston's masterly Tremont House of 1828-29, set a new standard for hotel design and is generally regarded as having initiated American leadership in that field (Figure 1). It was unsurpassed for the dignity of its exterior and the convenience of its plan, the latter ingeniously masking the irregularity of the site. The publication in 1830 of William Havard Eliot's detailed book, *A Description of Tremont House*, brought the hotel and its architect almost overnight national fame.

It is certainly not astonishing, considering the celebrity of the Tremont House, that the forty-two leading Bangor citizens who incorporated as the Bangor House Proprietary on February 26, 1833, should have applied to Isaiah Rogers for the plans of their proposed hotel (Figure 2). During 1833-34 Richard Bond (1797-1861) was Rogers' junior partner, although he was slightly his senior in age, but documentary evidence confirms Rogers as the designer of the Bangor House.⁴ Although Rogers designed the Bangor House, his one major work in Maine, its erection was undertaken by the local team of Charles G. Bryant (1803-1850) and Lyman Seavey (1807-1886), who may have made minor changes as the work progressed to its completion in December of 1834. Rogers had left Boston for New York City in 1834 to design and superintend the erection of a great hotel for John Jacob Astor, initially to have been called the Park Hotel but ultimately named the Astor House. That important commission was the probable reason why Rogers did not superintend the construction of the Bangor House, which opened on December 24, 1834.

Basically, the Bangor House plan was a reduced version of the Tremont House plan reversed from left to right (Figure 3). The earlier hotel had a 160-foot facade and elliptical corner bays entirely of granite with brick wings measuring 110 and 84 feet in length. There were 180 rooms in the Tremont House. The Bangor House was entirely of brick above the granite basement and originally measured 112 by 92 feet with a total of 115 rooms. The Greek Doric portico was wooden instead of granite with monolithic columns, as in the Tremont House. The Tremont House and Bangor House exteriors also differed in several minor respects. The portico frieze of the former had triglyphs and metopes, whereas the latter had Choragic Monument of Thrasyllus wreaths like those Rogers used on his Suffolk Bank entablature in Boston. The Tremont House attic was blind, whereas the Bangor House had low rectangular attic windows, originally screened by ornamental grilles, in its entablature frieze. The Bangor House had a low triangular wooden parapet with a central acroterion crowning its four middle front

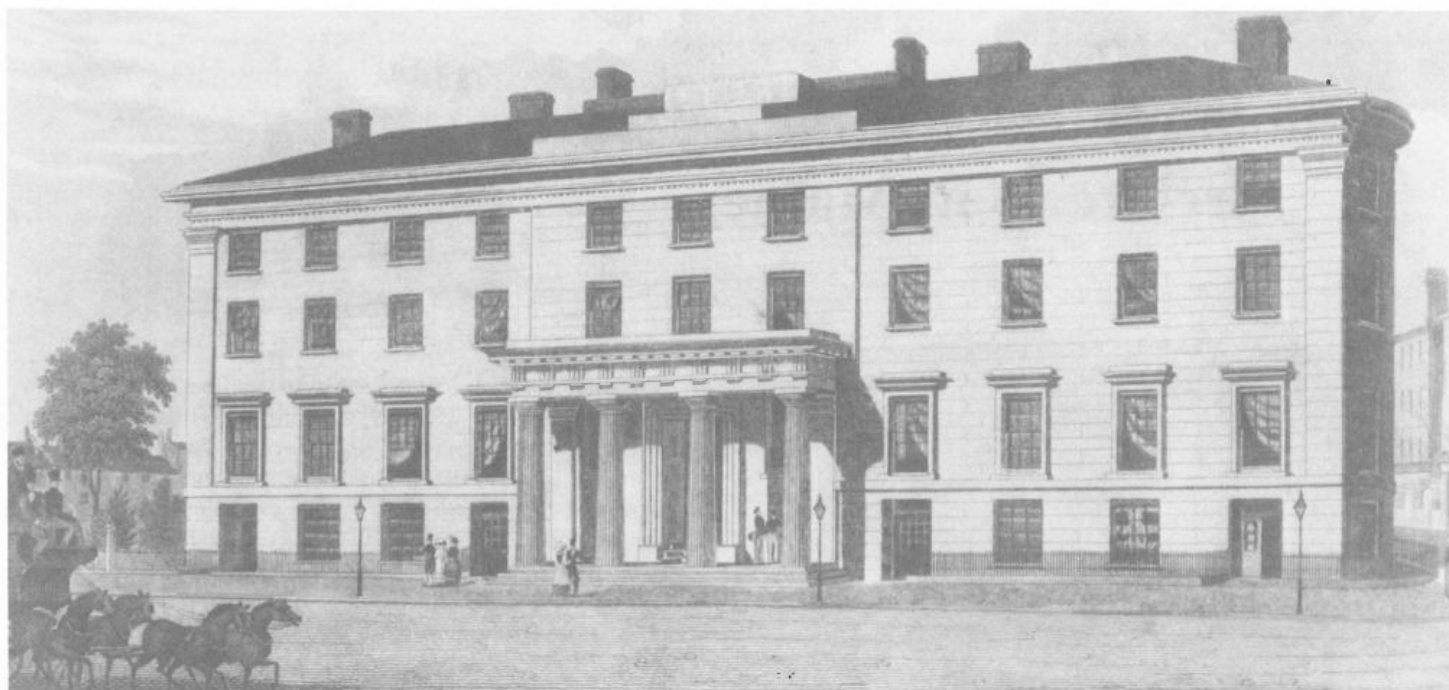


Figure 1. The Tremont House, Boston, c. 1830 view (Courtesy of James B. Vickery, Bangor).

bays, whereas the Tremont House had a wooden stepped blocking course in the analogous position. Much more significant than these minor variations was the way in which the acute angle where the streets intersected was masked by an elliptical bay in both buildings.

Contemporary descriptions dwelt upon the convenience of the Bangor House plan, the costliness and luxury of the furnishings, and the spaciousness of the 27 x 50 foot dining room. A 60 foot long brick stable and a 70 foot long wooden "chaise and carriage house" served the hotel.⁵ Portions of the lengthy description in the *Portland Evening Advertiser* of December 29, 1834, later appeared verbatim in Charles Gilman's description of the Bangor House in the August, 1837 issue of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*. On September 30, 1834, the *Boston Evening Transcript* printed a letter from Bangor dated September 27th in which the anonymous correspondent wrote:

The new Hotel . . . is not only an admirably public spirited undertaking, for which the proprietors deserve great credit, but really a splendid ornament of the town—the most of an architectural decoration which has yet been erected. In its general outline it resembles the Tremont House, and wants indeed little but the fine Quincy Granite, and especially the elegant piazza (the wooden Bangor House portico was apparently not yet in place) . . . to make it another such palace and paradise for travellers.

The author of a "letter from Bangor" in the *Portland Evening Advertiser* of March 19, 1835, commented, "The Bangor House is one of the most genteel public houses in New England, exceeded by none in this respect except by the Tremont in Boston, on the plan of which it was constructed;—it is not, however, so magnificent in its proportions, so elegant in workmanship, or so excellent in material—being of brick; but is as well furnished and as well arranged. It is said the furniture alone cost twenty-five thousand dollars." The letter mentioned Brussels carpets, marble mantels, hanging lamps, Pierpont grates, and Nott stoves. However, the impressive effect of the

very heavy silver forks was said to have been somewhat spoiled by the boorish table manners ascribed to some of the guests.

In 1865 the lowering of the Union Street grade led to alterations in which Isaiah Rogers played no part. The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* for December 11, 1865, reported the completion of "extensive alterations and repairs . . . going on for the past four months . . ." The lowered street grade fully exposed the basement, and the main entrance was moved to Main Street, the lowered Union Street entrance becoming the ladies' entrance. The office and parlors on the main floor became guest rooms, and the Main Street basement was fitted out with an office, toilet room and barber shop, coat room, reading room, gentleman's parlor, and bar room.

During 1838 Rogers made two trips to Maine in connection with granite for his Dutch Reformed Church at Lafayette Place and Fourth Street in New York City, and in 1839 he made another trip for the same purpose. Excerpts from his diary for those Maine visits appear as an appendix to this essay.⁶ The diary also provides documentation for the architect's other Maine commission, alterations to Samuel Farrar's House on Court Street in Bangor⁷ (Figure 4).

On Thursday, July 2, 1846, Rogers "Received letter from Bangor about the plan of alterations of Mr. Farrar's house." There are no further references to the matter in the diary entries until August 12, 1846, when Rogers recorded that he "Wrote letter to Bangor to Mr. Farrar to let him know I intend to start for Bangor on Friday next." In the meantime, Rogers had a letter from "Mr. Sparrow of Portland" on July 23rd, and on July 24th Rogers "Wrote letter to Mr. Sparrow of Portland about circular (illegible) for a store." Sparrow was almost certainly the architect Thomas J. Sparrow (1805-1870).

On Friday, August 14, 1846, Rogers "Started for Bangor at 5 o'clock in the *Penobscot*. Paid fare \$3." The following diary entries outline this trip:

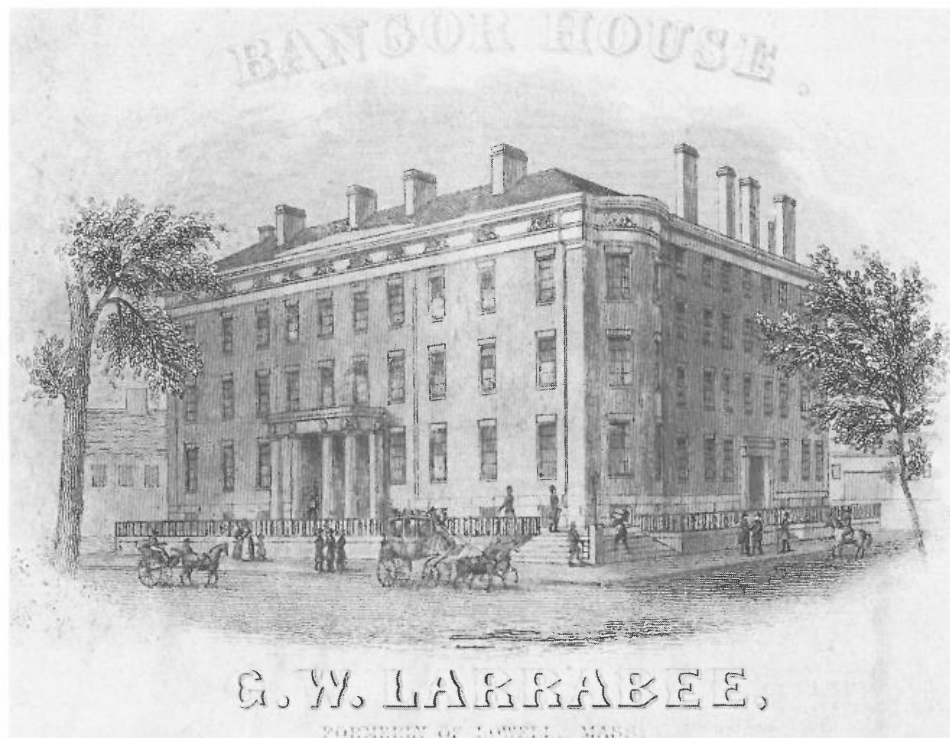


Figure 2. The Bangor House, c. 1835 view (Courtesy of James B. Vickery, Bangor).

August 15, 1846.

On board of steamer *Penobscot*. Arrived at Owl's Head and landed passengers and at the different landings on the river. Arrived at Bangor about 3 o'clock. Shifted my dress and then went to see Mr. Samuel Farrar about his house. Had a long conversation about his arrangements. Took tea with his family. Spent most of the evening and returned to Bangor House. Paid meals on board of the boat 75 cents. Boots 12½ cents. Felt much improved in health by my journey and found my appetite very much improved.

August 16, Bangor.

Felt some better. Health improving. Good appetite. Paid barber 6½ cents. Stayed about hotel most of the day. Very warm all day. In afternoon went and took a walk to see the new bridge in course of erection where the old bridge was carried away last spring by the freshet. Rode around the city with Mr. Pinder. He had a very fine horse.

August 17, Bangor.

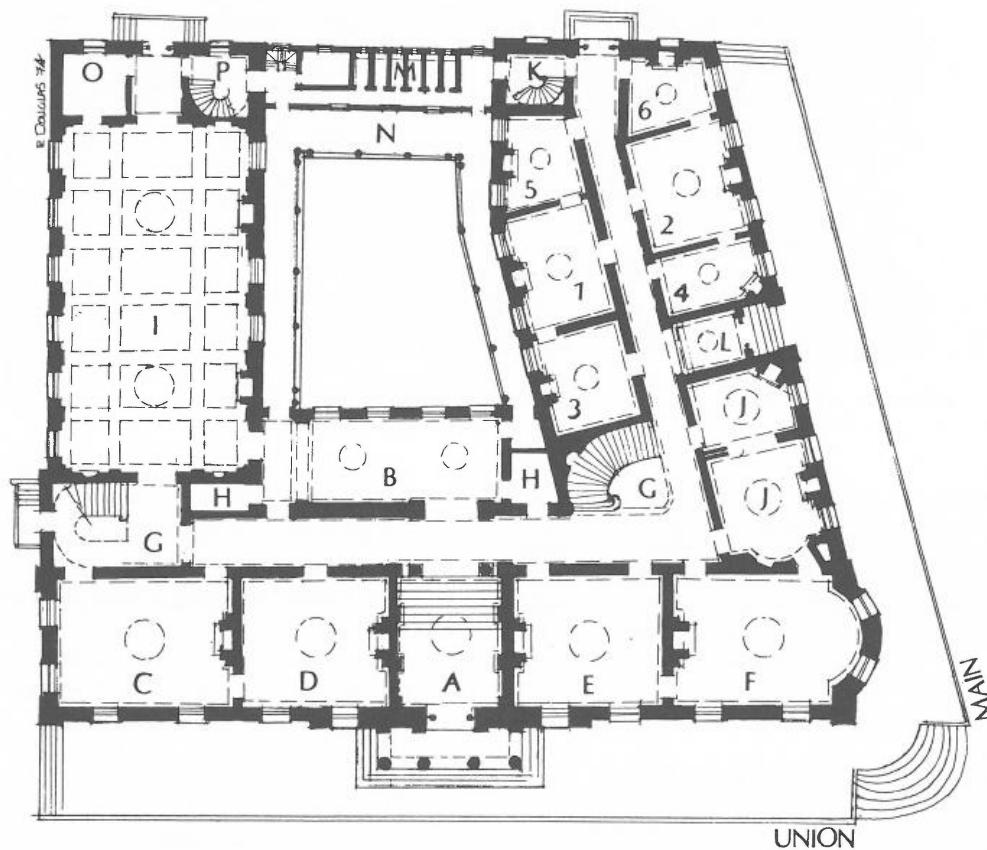
Went to Mr. Farrar's and took the following dimensions to make a plan for some alterations. (A largely illegible sketch plan follows. There were a large attached woodhouse and an offset stable at the left of the house.) At 11 o'clock started in the *Penobscot* steamer for Boston. Paid fare at Bangor House \$2.50. Paid sundries 12½ cents. Paid fare on board of boat for Boston \$4. Paid meals 50 cents.

On August 25, 1846, in Boston Rogers "finished outlining plans for Mr. Farrar's house." On August 27th Rogers "went to Tremont House and saw Mr. Farrar. Consulted about his house in Bangor. Settled about the plan." On August 31st in Boston Rogers "Finished outline of Mr. Farrar's house in Bangor. Figured plans of house for alterations at his house at Bangor." On September 3, 1846, "Mr. Farrar and lady called on me in Howard Street and got some more explanations about his plans. Seemed to like it much. Had his house struck by lightening a few days since." Rogers' north wing of the house replaced the woodhouse. It is not known what other changes occurred. The last reference to Maine in

any of the diaries is in the entry for September 5, 1846, when Rogers traded horses with Mr. Pinder of Bangor: "Gave Mr. Clapp \$10 to pay the passage of horse to Bangor and he to credit me the balance. Wrote letter to Mr. Pinder at Bangor that I would send my horse next steamer."

On July 23, 1862, Isaiah Rogers was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Construction in the U.S. Treasury Department, and from June 30, 1863, until his resignation on September 30, 1865, he was Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department. Rogers' plans for a new U.S. Custom House at Portland were completed before August 26, 1864, the date of newspaper advertisements soliciting bids for construction. The *Portland Daily Press* reported on November 5, 1864, that the contract has been awarded to Messrs. Sargent, Whidden and Coburn of Boston for about \$140,000. However, appropriations lagged, and nothing came of Rogers' plans. Apparently they were subsequently scrapped by Alfred Bult Mullett, his successor in office. No trace of them has been found. Rogers was in Portland on the Custom House project before February 13, 1865, when he wrote Secretary William Pitt Fessenden a report of his conference with a committee of Portland citizens advocating a new Custom House.⁸

A similar fate befell Rogers' proposed extension of Ammi Burnham Young's U.S. Custom House in Bangor. The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* reported on November 5, 1865, that plans for two-story north and south wings, each extending about forty feet, "have been made by Isaiah Rogers, Esq., Superintending (sic) Architect of the Treasury Department, and it is believed that appropriations can be obtained from Congress . . ." The December 17, 1865, issue of the *Whig* reported that "A. B. Mullett, Esq., Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, arrived here on Thursday evening to ascertain what



A. Principal Entrance and Stairs
 B. Bar Room, or Office
 C. Reading Room
 D. Smoking Room
 E. Gentlemen's Parlor
 F. Ladies Drawing Room
 G. Stairway
 H. Porter's Room

East Wing
 1. Dining Hall

West Wing

J. Ladies Dining Room
 1; 2. Private Parlors
 3; 4; 5; 6. Chambers
 K. Stairway
 L. Side Entrance and Stairs

Court Yard
 M. Privies
 N. Piazza
 O. Deposit Room
 N. Stairway

Figure 3: Plan of the Main Floor of the Bangor House. Drawn in 1974 by Ed Polk Douglas for *The Flight of the Grand Eagle* by Mundy and Shettleworth.



Figure 4. Samuel Farrar House, Bangor, showing Isaiah Rogers' 1846 north wing addition, 1986 view (MHPC).

enlargement of the Custom House building is necessary . . . " Mullett, who loathed Rogers, discarded the latter's plan in favor of his own. A year later the *Whig* for December 21, 1866, expressed dislike for Mullett's plan: "The original plan (by Rogers) of putting an extension on either end is much better, and strong hopes are now expressed that the present plan, before it is finally agreed upon, will receive many modifications."

Thus, fateful timing deprived Maine of at least one other major work by Isaiah Rogers, a Custom House for Portland, to stand with his Bangor House as an example of his creativity. Although it has been greatly altered and considerably enlarged, the original lines of the Bangor House are still discernable. Among the more than fifty known buildings by Isaiah Rogers, the Bangor House is the only surviving hotel, although the exterior walls of the Oliver House in Toledo, Ohio, gutted for a warehouse in 1919, also stand. After a long and productive life, Isaiah Rogers died in Cincinnati, his home for the last twenty-one years of his career, on April 13, 1869.⁹

Denys Peter Myers
Alexandria, Virginia
January, 1986

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ISAIAH ROGERS

- Bangor House, Union and Main Street, Bangor, 1833-34, Altered.
- Samuel Farrar House, Court Street, Bangor, 1846, North Wing Addition, Extant.
- U.S. Custom House, Portland, 1864, Not Executed.
- U.S. Custom House, Bangor, 1865, North and South Wing Addition, Not Executed.

NOTES

- ¹ On September 16, 1840, Edward Preble Little and his wife called on Rogers in New York City. Rogers' diary for that date referred to his visitors thus: "Friends which I owe not a little for my progress . . . so far, for they gave the first impulse."
- ² Vital Records, Boston City Hall.
- ³ Stoddard, Richard. "Isaiah Rogers' Tremont Theatre, Boston", *Antiques*, June, 1974, pp. 1314-1319. Gilman, p. 1315; granite, p. 1316. Bowen, Abel. *Bowen's Picture of Boston* (Boston: Otis Broaders and Company, 1838), p. 194: "The front is of Quincy and Hallowell granite; . . ."
- ⁴ In an advertisement by Rogers and his then partner, Henry Whitestone, in the *Louisville* (Ky.) *Daily Journal* for December 30, 1854, the Bangor House was listed among twenty "buildings designed and erected by Mr. Rogers during the last 20 years." That documentation was undiscovered when James H. Mundy and Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., wrote *The Flight of the Grand Eagle* (Augusta: Maine Historic Preservation Commission, 1977), which contains an excellent account of the Bangor House (pp. 20-26 and p. 122, footnote 23), although attributing it entirely to Charles G. Bryant and Lyman Seavey.
- ⁵ *Portland Evening Advertiser*, December 29, 1834.
- ⁶ The Rogers diaries for 1838-1855 with some gaps and for parts of 1861 and 1867 are in the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University in New York City.
- ⁷ Mundy and Shettleworth, *Flight of the Grand Eagle*, pp. 13-17 and p. 121, footnote 3. The Nathaniel Hatch House on Court Street was built in 1832-1833 by Charles G. Bryant. Samuel Farrar acquired the house in 1835.
- ⁸ National Archives, Record Group 121. Letterbooks of Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, January-June, 1865, pp. 60-62.
- ⁹ The most recent and complete account of Isaiah Rogers' career is contained in the *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* (New York, The Free Press, [1982]), Volume 3, pp. 599-602.

ISAIAH ROGERS' 1838 AND 1839 TRIPS TO MAINE AS RECORDED IN HIS DIARY

May 12, 1838.

Started for Portland in steamer *Portland*. Paid expenses \$8.00.

May 14, 1838.

Started for Blue Hill. Arrived there at 10:00. Went to quarry. No columns out nor any good chance to get them immediately unless some clearing is done. Went to Mr. Darling's quarry. Found a fair chance to get columns. Returned in afternoon much fatigued.

May 15, 1838.

Went to the top of Blue Hill Mountain. Saw the monument erected by Dr. Jackson. Added two feet in height on it. Put initials to stick on the pile. Went to the quarry. Examined over the whole. Informed it would take all the season to procure all the stone for the church not including the columns. Chance small to get columns out at present.

May 16, 1838.

Blue Hill. Started for Bucksport. Arrived at 12:00. Dined. Started for Frankfort. About 20 hammers (at work). Bought a salmon at Bucksport for 37½ cents per pound. Walked about Frankfort. Fine place. Some fine buildings. Quite (a) business place. Put up at Commercial Hotel. Paid . . . \$4.00.

May 17, 1838.

Frankfort. Started to Bangor. Arrived at 10:00. Paid expenses \$4.75. On the way, saw a white pine tree called the Union Tree. Went to Old Town. Paid expenses \$4.50. Returned (at) 3:00. Saw the mills, etc. Bought a salmon. Paid \$10.00 for two at 25 cents per pound. Paid for one at Bucksport \$5.00 at 37½ cents per pound.

May 18, 1838.

Bangor. Started for Portland (at) 5:00 in the *Bangor*. Very stormy in the fore-part of the day. Cleared up at about the middle of the afternoon. Arrived at Portland 4:30. Called on Mr. Merrill at his house. Very kindly received. Took tea at his house. Started for Boston at 8:00 in steamer *Portland*. Heavy sea.

August 28, 1838.

Boston. Took passage to Portland at 7:00. Weather fine.

August 29, 1838.

Arrived at Portland at 5:00 o'clock. Took the Bangor steamer to the east and arrived at Bucksport between 5:00 and 6:00 o'clock. Started for Mosquito Mountain and arrived about sundown. Weather fine. Stopped all night (on) the Mountain. Found a fine hostess and good fare.

August 30, 1838.

Frankfort. At the Mosquito quarry. Took an excursion over the quarry in the forenoon. Saw the works in a fine state to get out stone. In the afternoon, went to the top of Mt. Waldo. Saw one of the finest prospects I ever saw. A cloud closed on the top of the mountain and we descended.

August 31, 1838.

Went to Bucksport and took a gig to Blue Hill. Visited the two quarries. Saw 4 of the smallest columns rounded out, but not of the best kind. Saw one of the large columns at the Blue Hill quarry. The works looks well. Much better than when last there.

September 1, 1838.

Returned to Bucksport last night. Passed the day at the quarry. Rather stormy and disagreeable. Read some books. Rambled about some amongst the rocks. Fine fare at the boarding house. It is well kept, and (in) fine order. People kind and obliging.

September 3, 1838.

At the quarry, Frankfort. Strolled about through the forenoon. Went to Bangor in the afternoon. Arrived there at sundown. Called on a gentleman for Mr. Thomas in relation to getting a vessel to freight stone for church from Blue Hill.

September 4, 1838.

Bangor. Started for Portland at 2:00 o'clock in mail stage. Saw a very interesting country in passing along. Dined in Augusta. Arrived at Portland 10:30 o'clock. Took lodgings at the Chamberlain (Cumberland?) House. Much fatigued.

September 5, 1838.

Portland. Started for Boston 5:00 o'clock. A fine day. Dined at Portsmouth. Arrived at Salem 6:30 o'clock. Took the cars of the Eastern Railroad for Boston. Arrived in 45 minutes. The road appears to be well constructed. Stopped at the Tremont House.

September 10, 1839.

Started for Bangor at 7 o'clock. Paid fare to Bangor \$5.

September 11, 1839.

Arrived at Portland 6 o'clock. Called on Mr. (Thomas J.) Sparrow. Took a walk over the city with him. Detained all day in Portland. Stopped at the Cumberland House. Paid for refreshments etc. 35 cents. Paid for board and lodging \$1.50.

September 12, 1839.

Started from Portland for Bucksport. Had a very pleasant voyage. Arrived at Bucksport at 6 o'clock. Paid for meals 81½ cents. Wine champagne \$2.

September 13, 1839.

Went to Blue Hill. Called on Mr. Darling for an estimate of columns. Examined the stone got out at the Blue Hill Quarry for the church in Lafayette Place. Took account of them. Paid at Blue Hill for board and lodging \$2.50. Paid ferrying to Frankfort 82½ cents.

September 14, 1839.

Started from Blue Hill. Went to Bucksport in afternoon. Went to Mosquito Mountain. Saw no one there. All gone to farming. Returned to Bucksport in evening.

September 15, 1839.

Went to Bangor. Arrived at 12:00 o'clock. Took a walk over the city in afternoon with Mr. Wild. Sundry expenses 50 cents.

September 16, 1839.

Monday, started from Bangor at 5 o'clock in steamer *Bangor*. Weather rough. Arrived at Portland at 8 and ½ o'clock and started for Boston in the steamer *Portland* at 9 o'clock. Paid sundry expenses for dinner \$1. Horses hire and board \$10.

September 17, 1839.

Arrived from Portland at 9 o'clock. Had much fog.

Daguerreotype of Isaiah Rogers taken June 18, 1846.
Courtesy of The Bostonian Society.

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